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ABSTRACT

A child's literary experience may be "stretched" through extension activities such as reading aloud, discussion, writing, art, music, and drama. While any planned activity can be overused and work against the intent of furthering the child's literary growth, there are many valid ways of offering the child opportunities for savoring and reflecting about a book experience within the context of the classroom. One way is through sharing with others a story incident or an interesting use of language. An observant teacher can see that opportunities occur for brief, spontaneous sharing between one child and another. Some stories are so distinctive in plot, character development, or writing style that they evoke further involvement with these elements of the story through the child's writing. A child's literary development can also grow through frequent reading in a variety of genres. In addition, a patterned language book can be savored and revisited through reading aloud and writing stories based upon the language pattern. Planning and getting meaning across through voice inflection, pause, and pacing offer yet another way for stretching the entire literary experience, which not only deepens understanding of a story, but also permits the story to have impact on its readers' lives. (HOD)

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Stretching the Literary Experience

by Richard Van Dongen

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INSIGHTS into open education

Stretching the Literary Experience

By Richard Van Dongen
University of New Mexico

Children's responses to story are as varied as their individual differences from each other. Responses may range from a quiet, personal moment of reflection and a sigh to an exuberant chuckle and a brief, but urgent, need to share some incident. Response to story is unique, idiosyncratic and personal for each of us. It is supported by frequent interactions with the great diversity of story; this is only possible through having many opportunities for reading and responding to a story.

In our ongoing work with children we probably plan and anticipate the reading of story better than we do the responding to story. Opportunities for personal responses and group responses can be planned so that children's interactions with story are deepened and their imaginations and thinking are challenged. A personal response of a quiet sigh or a moment of silence needs to be supported by the teacher. Such a personal response cannot be hurried by the press of the school day; a brief moment or two is needed before going on. Because it is intensely personal at this moment, the reader may not care to share with others. The exuberant chuckle, however, may indicate a personal response which demands immediate sharing. Here, a brief opportunity for sharing will enrich the reader's response and provide others as well a moment to interact with story.

The opportunity for group response can be planned through the reading aloud of story to children. Group response to story stretches the experiences with story in different ways than personal responses. While participating in listening to story being read aloud, children are drawn in to the community of readers (Hepler and Hickman, 1982) who are interacting with story. The gasp or chuckle of the community experience in story is response which can be experienced only as a member of the group; the emotions and anticipations are shared. Through planned experiences of reading aloud, children have opportunities to stretch the literary experience in such different dimensions.

There is not only the planning of reading aloud within the schedule of the day, but planning which selections for reading aloud. Some stories are enhanced through the reading aloud experience while others are enhanced through the individual, personal reading. The Great Gilly Hopkins might be a sad, but joyful sharing in the community experience while The Bridge to Terabithia might be too personal and private for the reading aloud; in this case both books are by the same author, Katherine Paterson. Some picture books not only are visually exciting in the group experience, but the anticipation and excitement of the group may carry along some children in anticipating actions or language otherwise missed. In Chris Van Allsburg's Jumanji, the group response may carry some children further in anticipating the subtleties of what might happen to Danny and Walter Budwing, who never read instructions. In Margot Zemach's Hush, Little Baby, many children may join in on the repetitive text, and

the group as a whole may begin to anticipate the rhyming word. Again, some children may be carried along further in this group response setting than if they were alone with the book.

Stretching the literary experience is also possible through planning extension activities such as discussion, writing, art, music, drama and many other modes of expression. Reflections on children's personal responses and group responses to story provide some parameters and guidelines for determining extension activities.

First of all, every book a child reads does not need to be extended in some direct, visible and concrete way. For many stories the moment for a personal response, private or shared, or the group feeling at the end of reading aloud are powerful extensions and stretching which will be quickly dampened if children sense that every story they read must be extended by the teacher in some direct way. The message offered to children is that the teacher is merely checking their comprehension of the story or making sure that they have read it.

Secondly, activities which offer the opportunity for stretching the literary experience do provide children opportunities to interact with story. "Extension activities allow children the time to savor and absorb books" (p. 453, Cullinan, 1981). Such activities can provide a longer, deeper interaction with a book and evoke reflection of story.

Thirdly, for many children a book report has been the mode of extending the literary experience. While not always, it again often conveys the message that the reader is being held accountable for the content of a book rather than creating the opportunity to interact with the story by savoring and absorbing. While interaction with story could have been the intent of the book report in the first place, it becomes lost in the overpowering message to the child of being held accountable.

Fourthly, stretching the literary experience through extension activities will be ineffective unless children have opportunities for choice in selecting the kind of extension they wish to engage in. What will be a powerful experience for one child savoring one book may be quite inappropriate for another child reading the same book let alone a different one. An array of possibilities is important in the planning of extension activities with story.

These points indicate that activities which stretch the literary experience through providing opportunities for a deeper, reflective reader's response are legitimate experiences for the elementary classroom. Carefully planned activities for <u>some</u> books read may evoke children to revisit a favorite story or seek out other stories. While any planned activity can be overused and work against the intent of furthering children's literary growth, there are many valid ways of offering children opportunities for savoring and reflecting about a book experience within the context of the classroom.

Here are just a few areas for consideration in planning moments for stretching the literary experience by extending involvement with story.

1. <u>Interaction/sharing with others</u>. Children need opportunities for sharing a story incident or an interesting use of language. An

observant teacher can see that opportunities occur for brief, spontaneous sharing between the child and other children. Other events may be more carefully planned and structured. A scheduled sharing time encourages children to share briefly something about a book with the class members. At other times, several children who have all read the same book can participate in a planned book discussion.

2. Writing. Some stories are so distinctive in plot, character development or writing style that they evoke further involvement with these elements of the story through children's writing. Writing a different ending or writing about what might happen in a sequel to the story are rich extensions of some books for some children. Through children's writing, a character who is complex and finely drawn in the story might grapple with other events or problems than those in the story. A distinctive writing style by an author encourages some children to write a story similar in style and structure. Newsletters prepared for a peer audience provide opportunities for purposeful written communication. By writing book reviews in such newsletters, children reflect on story and develop an awareness of authors and illustrators as they share their views with peers.

3. Experiencing genre. Children's literary development grows through frequent reading in a variety of kinds of writing. Children extend their experience with some stories by reading other kinds of writing which may illuminate some dimension of the story. Reading a story cycle planned around a theme or an event encourages savoring and reflecting about story. A story cycle planned around the events of the 1840's and 50's in Taos, New Mexico, might include Ann Nolan Clark's Summer is for Growing, a story of a young girl living in a Taos hacienda in 1850. The reader's engagement in her story might be deepened by reading a biography about Father Martinez such as Jacqueline Bernard's Voices from the Southwest. A history book including this era such as Albert Prago's Strangers in Their Own Land, provides another way of stretching awareness of reading styles and insights into the story.

Seeking out variants on a common folk tale stretches insights into the literary form and encourages savoring of story. Marcia Brown's illustrated Cinderella from the French could be compared with Nonny Hogrogian's interpretation of the Grimms German variant. Both storyline and illustrations make for interesting comparison. A different cultural context for the same basic plot and many of the same motifs can be compared in Ann Nolan Clark's In the Land of Small Dragon, a Vietnamese folktale, or Ai-Ling Louie's retelling of Yeh-Shen, a Cinderella story from China.

4. Story and language structure. A patterned language book such as Remy Charlip's Fortunately can be savored and revisited through reading aloud and writing stories based upon the language pattern. The patterned language text offers opportunities for children's language production through chiming in on the

predictable language patterns embedded in the text. The pattern, "fortunately. . ." followed by "unfortunately. . ." is repetitive and predictable both in pattern and in the concepts embedded in the contrastive pairs of events. A read aloud session promotes anticipation and chiming in. The writing of other fortunately/unfortunately stories may be encouraged.

5. Cooking. Cooking indeed may be one way to provide opportunity for savoring a moment of story. In Arlene Mosel's Tikki Tikki Tembo, the boys are eating rice cakes by the well into which Tikki tikki tembo-no so rembo-chari bari ruchi-pip peri pembo consequently falls. In one kindergarten class, a youngster asked, "What are rice cakes?" This provided a cooking experience over the next few days in which the children learned about rice cakes, examined the ingredients and used a recipe to cook the rice cakes. Older children may find the text of Barbara Walker's The Little House Cookbook a fascinating way to delve back into the books of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Each recipe is referenced to a passage in one of the books. Again, many of these recipes are quite feasible for children to use in cooking. Some books, such as Louise Jackson's Over on the River, provide a recipe in the back of the book; in this case, Mama's Tea Cakes.

6. Drama. Interpretation of story is perceived from another perspective through drama. The voice and actions of a character provide new ways of thinking about the character's motives or actions. The planning for a simple story reader theater requires the readers of story to revisit story and reflect upon such aspects in order to present a scene or incident in a story. In story reader theater, a narrator and a reader for each character read the selection chosen. Planning and getting meaning across through voice inflection, pause and pacing offer potential for stretching the entire literary experience.

7. Author/Illustrator. The reading of a body of works by a favorite author or illustrator extends interaction in story by allowing the reader to bring other experiences with the author or illustrator to bear upon the story. Certain characteristics of style of language or illustration may be generalized. Comparisons of characters or settings of stories encourage returning to the works. Some writers and illustrators will be appreciated for their diversity in language and illustration which is appropriately different in the context of each story.

Whether personal and group responses are nurtured by the teacher or extension activities are planned for some stories, children will grow in their imaginations and reflection of story. Stretching the literary experience not only deepens understanding of story, but permits story to have impact on the lives of readers.

NOTES

Hepler, Susan I. and Janet Hickman. "'The Book was Okay. I Love You'--Social Aspects of Response to Literature." Theory into Practice, 1982, 21 (4), 278-283.

"Community of readers" is an idea proposed by Hepler and Hickman to talk about how children, in alliance with friends and teachers, work together to help each other learn to read.

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